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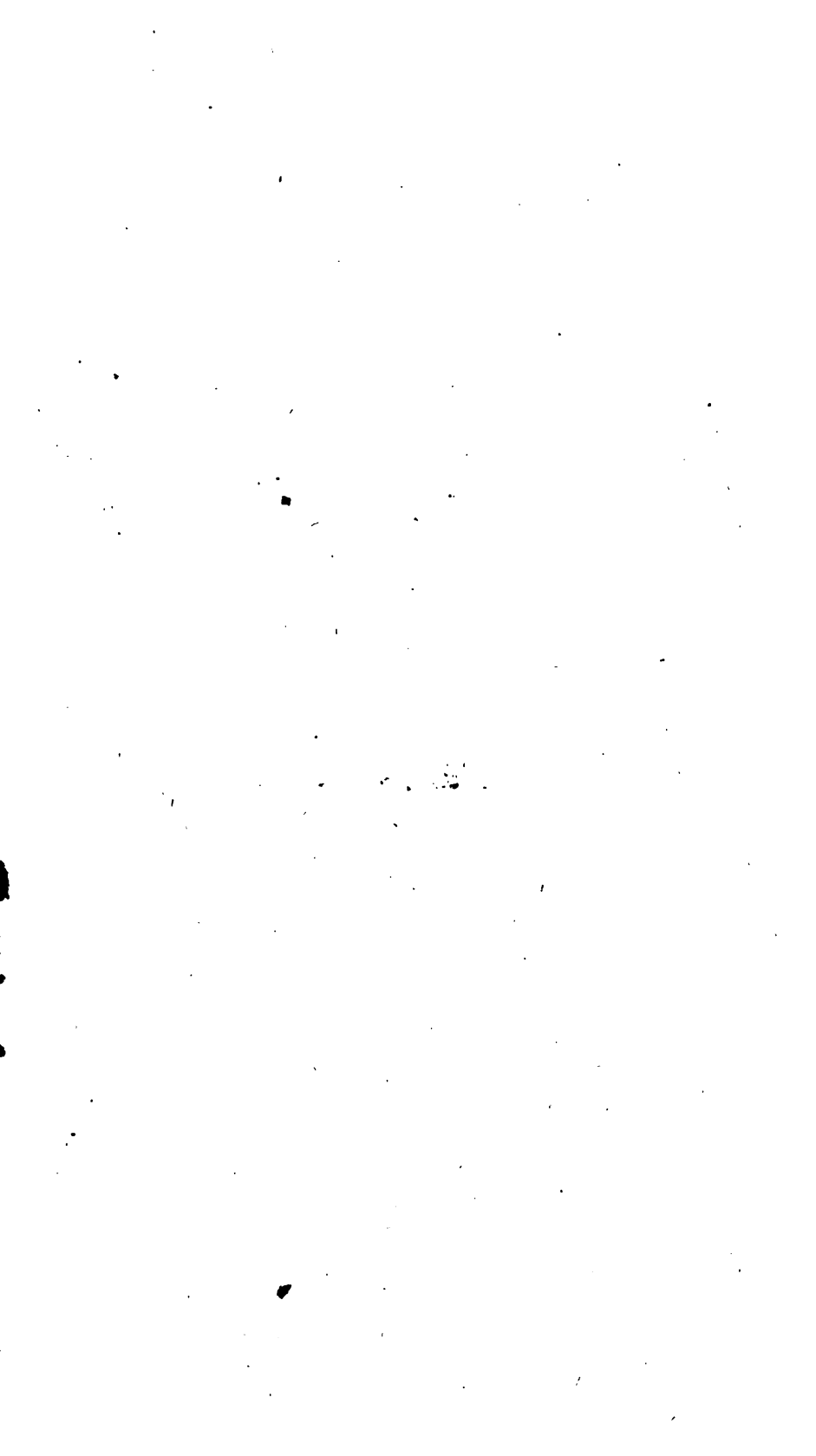
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FROM

Henry W. Longfellow





ENGLISH LITERATURE,

AND

ITS PLACE IN POPULAR EDUCATION.

AN ESSAY READ BEFORE THE NATIONAL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION, BOSTON,
AUGUST, 1872.

BY

FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, A.M.

AUTHOR OF "HAND-BOOK OF ENGLISH LITERATURE" (BRITISH AUTHORS) AND
"HAND-BOOK OF ENGLISH LITERATURE" (AMERICAN AUTHORS),
"CLOUD PICTURES," ETC.



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ENGLISH LITERATURE, AND ITS PLACE IN POPULAR EDUCATION.

[An Essay read before the National Teachers' Association, Boston, August, 1872. By FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, A.M.]

THE prosperity of a nation comes from well-directed industry; its happiness from the impartial execution of equal laws; its greatness from the indomitable spirit of its people; but its lasting glory from its letters and art. No seats of empire have received so much of the homage of mankind as the small cities of Athens and Jerusalem. Merely commercial cities, like Tyre, Carthage, and Palmyra, are soon forgotten. Even Rome is less revered as the home of the Cæsars, the mother of modern states, and the source of modern civilization, than as the seat of a magnificent literature that has enriched every language of Christendom, and is still a light to the learned world. Success in arms, and the acquisition of territory, give temporary renown; but, after the lapse of a few centuries, *every thing but the great thoughts of a people perishes*. Not one stone stands upon another on the site of Persepolis; and no one can now enumerate the tribes that were subject to the Persian monarchs, or fix the limits of their empire. But the precepts of Zoroaster (the majestic contemporary of Abraham) still survive, indestructible amidst all the vicissitudes of human affairs. The history of letters re-

fuses to be divided by the reigns of monarchs, and is measured by the appearance of great authors,—as the zodiac is measured by its constellations. We speak of the age of Dante, careless of what Julius or Nicholas or Gregory might occupy the papal chair. The times of Chaucer we know; but King Edward III. is only a lay-figure, a mere accessory, in the picture we imagine. The idea of Don Quixote is more real to us than Philip II.; and the time may come when the sea-fight of Lepanto will be remembered chiefly because one of Don John's victorious galleys carried as a common sailor the great Cervantes. We know that the illustrious Goethe was a counsellor of state; but the prince he served is already a shade. So, to return to English history, we speak of the age of Spenser, Bacon, and Shakspeare; and the name of the great Elizabeth has been made into an adjective to denote the brilliant epoch in whose glory she had but little share. Milton, once the Latin secretary, outshines his political superior, the great Lord Protector. Stolid Queen Anne lives only in the memory of the elegant essayists of her time. Further on we trace the same intellectual lineage. Hanoverian Georges and Williams are nought. It is the age of Scott, of Byron, and Wordsworth, the age of Carlyle, Macaulay, Dickens, Thackeray, and Tennyson.

In this country all things are so new, and political events have such an intense significance, that we do not look at affairs as posterity will look at them. But who can doubt, that, when the true perspective has been adjusted, ours will be known as the age of Emerson, Irving, and Hawthorne, of Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier, of Lowell and Holmes? Who can doubt, that, in the next century, people will say to their grandchildren, "*I heard Emerson in my childhood. I once saw the gracious smile of Longfellow. I have felt the electric stroke of Holmes's wit. Shall*

I ever forget Lowell's features, gleaming as though from an inner light, when he recited the 'Ode to the ever sweet and shining memory of the sons of Harvard that died for their country'?"

The place which the study of literature should hold among other scholastic pursuits is hardly doubtful. While other studies are pursued mainly for discipline, literature is at once a means and an end of culture. Language is the most marvellous instrument of human thought; and its study employs our noblest and strongest powers, as well as our most subtle perceptions and refined tastes; and in literature, as the appropriate end of linguistic studies, we derive the highest pleasures of which our natures are capable.

Literature is a part of the world's history, and, in many respects, the most important part. The rise and fall of dynasties, and the changes in forms of government, are chiefly important on account of the light they throw on the progress of political science, and the hope they give of the advance of mankind towards justice and equality. But the real life of a nation is preserved in its literature; and the student who is familiar with the personal memoirs, letters, plays, and songs of any era, has a better knowledge of the character and condition of the people than all the formal histories can give him.

But I do not forget that this is an assembly of instructors, and that it is properly expected, in an essay upon the study of literature, that some practical suggestions should be made respecting its pursuit in public schools. Let us endeavor to find the proper place in a popular course of instruction for beginning the study of literature.

We shall suppose that the art of reading intelligently has been acquired, that arithmetic has been begun, that the general outlines of geography have been made familiar,

and that the relations of words in sentences are understood. At this point, the judicious teacher should consider what further subjects are of the most importance to the average pupil. The studies commonly pursued next in an English course — besides using higher reading-books — are the higher mathematics, history, physical geography, some departments of natural science, the first elements of physics, rhetoric, and mental philosophy. English literature has rarely found a place.

It is undoubtedly the judgment of the best teachers, that mathematics should be continuously studied, and form a part of every day's routine. Next in order come the elements of physical geography, and such branches of natural science as the school has facilities for teaching; special prominence being given to physiology, or rather to so much of physiology as relates to the proper care of the body and its surroundings.

Whatever we may think of literature as the embodiment of thought; of rhetoric, which fills a sort of tailor's place, to fit out thoughts in smooth garments, and is often, like other tailors, inclined to think more of the elegance of the clothes than of the soul of the wearer; and of mental philosophy, which has been groping in mists, from Plato down to Herbert Spencer, and has never found the *Ego*, nor got a step nearer the First Cause, — all these interior processes and furnishings must yield in point of utility to the sciences that put us into intelligent relations with the world we inhabit.

A gentleman told me of a rambling excursion he once made, in company with Horace Mann and one or two other friends, in the fields and woods of Virginia, near Washington. "Don't you think it shameful," said the great educator, "that we have been so badly brought up? Here are we, all of us, pronounced to be Masters of Arts,

or Doctors of Laws, by the authority of college faculties. But what arts are we masters of? We scarcely know a tree or shrub, fruit or flower, bird or animal, especially out of our native State; and we dare not taste a strange berry, or smell a new blossom, for fear of being poisoned. If we were starving, we should not know how to satisfy our hunger. Nature is a sealed book to us; and yet the earth is fruitful, the woods and fields are full of life. We alone have no place at the table where all are fed."

To dwell upon the subjects suggested in this conversation would consume too much of our time at present. Let us pass on to consider a few other branches of study. As for rhetoric, it would seem to be a waste of time to study it formally, — at least, in any short course. Any competent teacher ought to be able to point out to pupils the correct use of language, and the propriety of figures of speech; and this should be done as a part of the daily exercise in reading. The style which is commended by such pedants as Blair is what all our best writers strive to avoid. Mental and moral philosophy cannot be pursued with advantage by immature pupils, and should certainly be postponed to near the end of the course. There remain the two topics of history and literature. I do not see that history is entitled to any great precedence. If a pupil has such an acquaintance with English history as he would gain from the small but admirable work of Charles Dickens, it would seem best that he should next get a knowledge of the writers of the various epochs, and that the political and literary events of the country should thereafter be taken in connection. The same remark may be made with regard to the history of the United States. If you attend an examination of a Boston grammar school, you will find one or more of the blackboards covered with *anno domini* dates; and boys and girls will be eager to give you some fact, more or less

important, that is associated with every date. But if they were asked by some foreigner who was just beginning to read our literature, when Irving was born, or what works he had written, who Jonathon Edwards was, whether Cooper was a greater novelist than Mrs. Blank, and whether Emerson wrote often for the "Chambermaid's Magazine," what answers would he get? But surely, in any point of view, a knowledge of the works of our chief poets, historians, and essayists, is of as much consequence as the opinions and doings of James K. Polk, William H. Harrison, Franklin Pierce, and similar persons with whom our historic Muse is occupied.

One of the grave errors in our system is in the persistent reading and re-reading of books that are intended mainly for exercises in elocution. It is true that many of these series of Readers have been compiled by scholars, and contain many admirable selections; although I have seen an advertisement by one publisher who claims, as the peculiar glory of *his* set of books, that the pieces they contain are mostly original, — as though the style of a professional book-maker should be preferred, as a model for students, to the finished sentences selected from works of genius!

Now, reading occupies a part of every day in school, and should receive even more attention than it does. But it must be admitted that the miscellanies we place before children — half a dozen in a course — are not, on the whole, very attractive; and they are certainly not useful, considering the time they occupy. On one page is a *goodish* poem; on another a bit of a sermon; here a tolerable story; there a speaker's peroration. The matters treated of belong to no one age or country; and the styles are as various as the matter. How utterly unphilosophical this proceeding is, either for the acquisition of knowledge or for the formation of taste, this assembly of teachers ought to know.

And this leads to the last point and the main purpose of this essay, which is to urge that the course of daily reading in grammar schools be wholly reformed and utilized; that after two or three preliminary collections have been gone through, and the pupils are able to read with tolerable fluency, the subsequent or higher reading-books be discarded, and their further daily practice be in systematic works, that will not only give proficiency in reading, but inspire a love of Nature, impart useful knowledge, and cultivate a taste for literature.

A good example has already been furnished in Dr. Worthington Hooker's "Child's Book of Nature." Dr. Asa Gray's treatise, entitled "How Plants Grow," is another of like character. Dickens's "Child's History of England" (already mentioned) would be an excellent work for young pupils.

Should the course here recommended be generally adopted, we should very soon find the results of the labors of scientific explorers and *savans* put into popular and attractive books to meet the demand.

Instruction in English literature should go on with these branches in equal step. Any well-disciplined child of fourteen years (and perhaps less) is ready to receive judicious lessons in this department. For this purpose, it is not necessary to begin with Chaucer, nor to follow any rigid rule of chronology. Bacon and all the philosophers, and Taylor and all the theologians, may be reserved for maturer years; but the teacher can take works of acknowledged merit that are capable of being easily understood, and lead his charge through pleasant fields, until, by imperceptible degrees, they reach the heights. When they have been accustomed to notice peculiarities of style and modes of thought, and have, in other respects, sufficient maturity of mind, they can trace the development of lan-

guage historically, and view the treasures of our literature as in a moving panorama.

It will be advisable, in all cases where the means allow, to read certain works entire. Thus Shakspeare cannot be profitably studied by means of selections; but the best of his plays should be read from Hudson's or Rolfe's editions. No separate scenes are either satisfactory or instructive. Other works may be named for thorough reading; such as Milton's "Comus," Goldsmith's "Traveller" and "Vicar of Wakefield," Lowell's "Vision of Sir Launfal," Longfellow's "Evangeline," Whittier's "Snow-Bound," Emerson's "May Day," and one or two of Tennyson's "Idyls of the King."

But all educators know that the cases in which complete works of this kind can be procured in sufficient numbers for the use of a school will be exceptional. And, in any event, it will be desirable to supplement this course with some volume of selections arranged in historical order, and containing the necessary biographical, critical, and linguistic notes. The benefit of such a course of instruction introduced into the grammar schools, and continued in the high schools, would be incalculable. The teacher would make a daily study of the author from whom the lesson was to be taken. He would fill out the narrow outline of the biography. He would illustrate and refine upon the critical estimates, giving his own views, and stimulating the pupils to examine for themselves, and to form habits of independent judgment. It is doubtful whether any branch of instruction would yield more certain and more abundant fruit.

In my boyhood I never, by any accident, had my attention directed to the beauties or excellences of English literature. "Paradise Lost" was used only for the odious exercise of parsing; and the noblest lines of Milton are to

this day connected with the pattering of conjugations and declensions. No more effectual way could be taken to disenchant the student than by breaking the lines, as upon the wheel, and analyzing the still quivering members by the dull rules of syntax.

In a few modern schools, English literature receives attention, but they are generally high schools. The bulk of our children, however, never reach the high schools; and, if they did, there is no reason why the study should not be taken up earlier. Abolish the profitless reading of scrap-books, and let each day's reading be given, in turn, to some branch of natural science, to history, and to literature. The elements of good reading are few and simple; and these can be attended to *as incidents*. If special practice in elocution is desired, the teacher can make use of a work like that of Prof. Monroe. Each pupil will show by his voice and manner whether he appreciates what he is reading. The cultivation of natural and proper tones, the adaptation of manner to the style, — as in narrative or descriptive prose, and in humorous, pathetic, or dramatic verse, — will come naturally, under the skilful teacher's care.

There cannot be too much reading of good authors. No one ever became an elegant or even a correct writer by following the precepts of grammarians, or the prim examples of literary Pharisees. A knowledge of the structure of our language and the natural relations of its parts, the power of using appropriate imagery, the nice discrimination between apparent synonymes and the easy, fluent motion in which thought rolls on, can only be acquired by long and intimate acquaintance with the works in which these traits are exemplified.

Experience has proved that even young pupils take up these courses of reading in literature, as well as in science,

with avidity. In schools where they have been introduced, no exercises are so eagerly anticipated or so thoroughly enjoyed.

We take great pains to make classical students appreciate the simple majesty of Homer, the elegance of Virgil, the sublimity of the Greek tragedians, and the vigor and brilliancy of Horace. But the body of English literature, as it exists, contains more of grandeur and beauty, more of pathos and wit, more of humor (a quality in some respects peculiar to our race), more of fervid oratory, and more of noble history, than the stores of the classic languages combined. I am a strenuous advocate for classical education; but I maintain that a boy who feels the greatness of Burke and of Webster is more apt to acknowledge the power of the Oration on the Crown, and of that for the poet Archias. He who has been thrilled by the sublimity of Milton will grow enthusiastic over the pages of Virgil and Dante; and, when the vast world of Shakspeare's thought has been opened before his vision, he will see more clearly what is immortal in the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Our own literature must be considered as the best part of our history, and the just basis of our national pride. It may be said to have commenced within the memory of men now living; for the venerable Bryant is the earliest of our great poets; and Irving, Cooper, and Channing were the first of our classical prose-writers. In less than fifty years, we have produced works in all departments of human thought which the world will not let die, and which our mother-country is becoming proud to own and adopt. Let us see to it that our youth are taught properly to appreciate these treasures; and, for that end, let us endeavor to appreciate them more fully ourselves.

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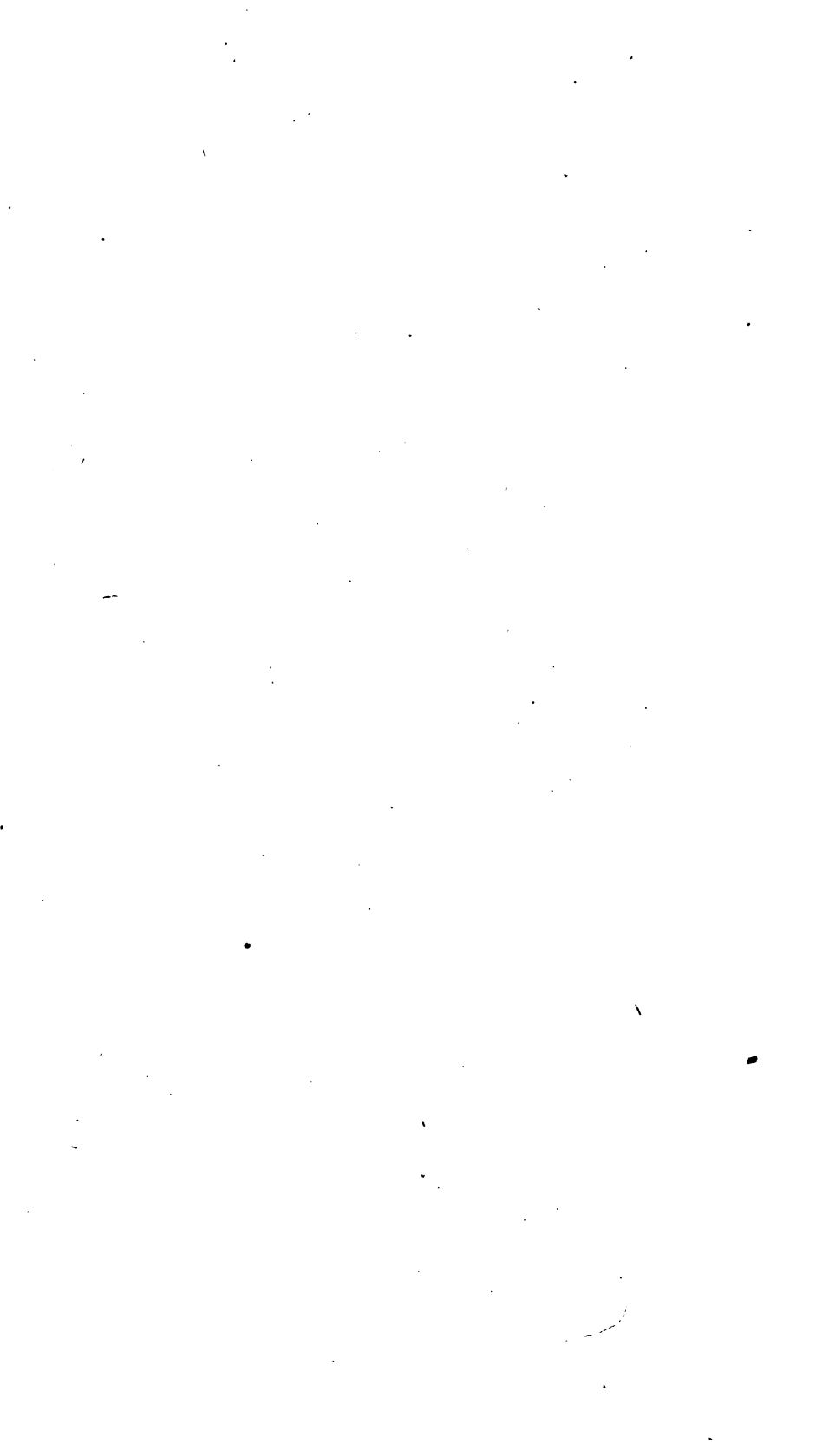
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